

## House Committee Action:

# METRIC BILL REPORTED; LABOR STAND IN DOUBT

Reviving legislation with a stormy past and still uncertain future, the House Science and Technology Committee July 17 reported a bill (HR 8674—H Rept 94-369) that would set up a 25-member national board to help coordinate voluntary conversion to the metric system of measurement in the United States.

In hopes of cooling opposition by labor and small business groups that doomed similar legislation in the 93rd Congress, the committee made a number of changes in a metric conversion bill it approved in 1973. In general, the changes left many provisions vaguer, postponed decisions on whether the federal government would pay special subsidies to cover conversion costs for union workers or small businesses and eliminated a 10-year target period for the conversion process. The new bill, as well as the earlier version, would not require any business to convert to the metric system, merely allow the board to help coordinate the voluntary conversion plans of related industries.

John J. Motley III of the National Federation of Independent Business, a small business association, called the new version acceptable, one that his group would neither support nor fight. But spokesmen for organized labor groups, who thought they had worked out a compromise with the committee, took issue with some of the language in the committee's report.

"The bill is acceptable. The report is a disaster," said Tom Hannigan of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers July 21. Hannigan had been watching the legislation closely for AFL-CIO unions.

Hannigan, who called a July 23 meeting of organized labor groups to discuss the measure, suggested that the committee may have "completely knocked out labor support for the bill." But he also indicated that the addition of floor amendments or other steps might meet some of labor's objections.

Hannigan said after the meeting that representatives of AFL-CIO member unions were upset by the report, but had not settled yet on a particular course of action. The representatives planned to meet July 24 with James W. Symington (D Mo.), chairman of subcommittee that wrote the bill, to discuss the situation.

The labor spokesmen were disturbed by language in the report that they read as a declaration that the United States would convert to the metric system. They also objected to language that appeared to condemn a general subsidy program to help workers pay for metric tools. This language undid understandings labor had reached with the committee, Hannigan said.

"We've been double-crossed on the deal," he complained.

The administration favored creation of a board to help coordinate voluntary conversion to the metric system. It generally had opposed federal subsidies to help pay conversion costs, but agreed in 1975 to let the board propose further legislation on this issue if it wanted.

## Background

The United States was the only major industrialized nation that had not begun a coordinated change-over to the

## Moving to Meters

Those supporting metric legislation argue that the conversion process is already underway in the United States. They maintain that it would save time, money and confusion if a national board coordinated increasing use of metric standards of measurement.

In testimony before the House Science and Technology Committee April 29, Richard W. Roberts, director of the Commerce Department's National Bureau of Standards, cited numerous examples of use of the metric system by industry and government.

Roberts' testimony listed almost 40 major companies that had committed themselves to use of the metric system. They included General Motors Corp., Ford Motor Co., Chrysler Corp., International Business Machines Corp., Xerox Corp., Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Co. and Seven-Up Co. In addition, the testimony noted that major pharmaceutical manufacturers and Eastman Kodak Co. already were predominantly metric.

All 50 states were committed to changing to the metric system in their education departments, the Science Committee report on HR 8674 added, and a number planned to change their textbooks to the metric system by 1976. Roberts' material also listed 13 states that had begun to include metric distance information on some road signs. Pennsylvania also was testing consumer reaction to the sale of gasoline by the liter instead of the gallon.

At the federal level, the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service were adding metric information to their signs and a number of other departments and agencies also carried out metric activities. The Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms had issued regulations to help the U.S. wine industry implement a plan to begin use of metric bottle sizes in January 1979.

At the local level, Roberts' testimony also pointed out that Boone, N.C., called itself the "kilometer-high city," while Sunrise, Fla., had proclaimed the metric system its official standard of weights and measures.

metric system. In order to compete in international trade, however, a number of U.S. businesses had started to convert to metric measurement. The federal government and the states also were moving toward the metric system in other ways. (Box, this page)

Congress made the metric system legal, but not mandatory, in the United States in 1866. Practically, there was little interest in the subject until the post-World War II technological boom. After almost a decade of discussion, Congress in 1968 passed a bill requiring the Commerce Department to study the feasibility of greater use of the metric system.

The Commerce Department report, issued in 1971, recommended that the United States become "predominantly metric" at the end of 10 years under a

nationally coordinated conversion program. The Senate passed a bill designed to implement the recommendation in 1972, but the House did not act in the 92nd Congress. (1972 *Almanac* p. 658)

In October 1973, the House Science Committee reported legislation that would have set up a national board to coordinate and plan a voluntary conversion program. The bill would have set a national policy encouraging industry to make metric units "the predominant, although not exclusive" standard of measurement within 10 years after the board developed an over-all conversion plan. The committee also argued that the costs of conversion should "lie where they fall," opposing subsidies to help small businesses convert or help workers buy new tools or complete any necessary retraining. (1973 *Almanac* p. 538)

Faced with opposition to the bill by small business groups and three AFL-CIO trade unions, the Rules Committee held up action on the measure for four months. Eventually, the committee gave the bill a rule allowing consideration of floor amendments backed by labor and small business groups.

Rather than accept these amendments, Science Committee Chairman Olin E. Teague (D Texas) brought the bill to the floor under the suspension of the rules procedure barring floor amendments. The House defeated the bill; its supporters ended up with a whopping 109 votes fewer than the two-thirds majority needed to pass legislation under suspension. This defeat ended efforts to enact metric legislation in the 93rd Congress. (1974 *Almanac* p. 482)

## Committee Bill Provisions

The revised version of the bill would establish a 25-member board with three principal duties. It would draw up a broad program to plan and coordinate voluntary conversion by industry, carry out education programs to make the metric system familiar to the public and conduct research to determine the effects of conversion on consumers, small businesses, labor and other groups.

The language of the bill made no mention of conversion subsidies for any group, but labor and small business groups had agreed to settle for provisions giving the board authority to recommend legislation on this subject.

The bill also included no target dates for completion of the conversion process or for development of the board's plans to coordinate voluntary conversion. The 1973 version would have required the board to develop a formal plan for voluntary conversion, which would have been subject to congressional disapproval. Under the new version, the board probably would develop an internal plan, a Science Committee aide explained.

The board would have no power to compel use of the metric system. It would go out of existence when Congress decided it had fulfilled its responsibilities. The bill would authorize open-ended sums for the board's operations, which the committee estimated would cost \$3-million a year.

## Committee Views

"The choice before the Congress is not whether we should move to the metric system," the committee maintained. "The choice is between continuing the conversion process in an entirely uncoordinated fashion, as is the case now, or going forward with the conversion process on a coordinated basis."

HR 8674, the committee explained, reflected wide agreement that voluntary conversion should be coor-

minated. In addition, the committee contended, "many sectors of the national community" were waiting for "a firm statement by the Congress committing the United States to the conversion" before they adopted the metric system.

## Subsidies

The committee did not specifically address the question of whether the federal government should subsidize workers who had to buy metric tools, but touched on the issue in general terms. "The committee feels that minimum costs will be incurred if conversion is accomplished, in general, without federal subsidies," the report said. "A program of automatic general reimbursement by the federal government would be very difficult to administer."

However, the committee pointed out that the board could recommend legislation if it identified "unresolved problem areas."

The report dealt more specifically with the question of providing assistance to small businesses. The committee said it expected the Small Business Administration to provide assistance to small businesses needing help to convert and to help protect federal contracts held by small firms during the conversion process.

## Timetable

While it had considered setting a 10-year target date for completion of conversion, the committee said it recognized the need for flexibility. "The committee envisions a conversion period sufficiently long so that no industry or sector of society will be unduly harmed or disadvantaged," the report said. "The committee also desires a conversion period sufficiently short so that the social and economic costs of conversion will be reduced."

## Other Issues

The committee made it clear that it expected the board membership to represent various segments of the society, including small business, agriculture, business, labor, education, the consumer, state and local governments, and science and engineering. The committee also stressed that the board would be independent of any federal department.

Industry groups working together to coordinate conversion plans should not face prosecution under antitrust laws, the committee explained. To make it clear that groups were working together under the auspices of the board, the committee suggested, a board representative should attend industry meetings on conversion.

## Outlook

The outlook for the legislation remained cloudy until labor decided whether it could work out a way to meet its objections or whether it would have to oppose the bill. One reason for proceeding cautiously, Hannigan explained, was that labor opposition could kill the bill for two more years.

Robert McClory (R Ill.), who had urged Congress repeatedly to pass legislation making a stronger commitment to the metric system, had agreed to support the committee bill. McClory did not plan to offer any amendments, an aide said, although he probably would support an amendment setting a 10-year target period for conversion.

A staff member of the Senate Commerce Committee suggested that metric legislation would run into little trouble in the Senate, if it could get through the House. The Senate committee was waiting for the House to act. ■

—By Elizabeth Bowman